

## Deliver us from 'Corporate Perversion': A Conversation with Drs Ephraim Radner and Graham Kings on the State of our Communion

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### 1. Seeing the present together

Can anything good come out of the South? Judging from the 'Communion perception'—to borrow the phrase from Dr Ephraim Radner's comment on the Church of Nigeria's Constitutional Revision—the answer is no. The Communiqué from the Third South to South Encounter is a landmark in the history of the Anglican Communion, for the reason that the non-western member churches of the Communion came together and engaged the Communion on questions of its fundamental calling as the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church'. Churches in the west would miss the point if they take the Communiqué simply as a positional statement on the crisis provoked by the North American churches. Equally, church leaders in the South need to follow up the commitments in the Communiqué and translate them into practical tasks.

It is helpful for us in the West and South to venture and discern together the landscape before us. In the first place, the Communion has moved a long way from referring to churches outside of the British Isles (and North America) as 'Churches of our colonial empire and the Missionary Churches'<sup>1</sup> to churches in the 'South'. The term 'South' used in our context is relatively new. It first appeared, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in 1975, as 'a collective name for the industrially and economically less advanced countries of the world, typically situated to the south of the industrialized nations'. Further, whilst the Communion has initiated South to South Encounters from the early 1990s, the term 'global South' has not been formally adopted, which, in its turn is a recent term that is used to refer to nations in Central and Latin America, Africa, and most of Asia that are bound by similar socio-economic conditions.

Secondly, recent studies on world Christianity, from Barrett, Kurian and Johnson's *World Christian Encyclopedia* to Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity*,<sup>2</sup> emphasise two parallel shifts in Christianity: a shift in *concentration* from North to the South, and a shift in *expression* from historical and denominational to independent and spontaneous forms of Christianity. To Jenkins, Christianity in the South is primarily 'enthusiastic and spontaneous, fundamentalist and supernatural-oriented'.<sup>3</sup> New Christian nations and new crusades will emerge from the South, which may have important ramifications for social stability and national security.<sup>4</sup> It is intriguing that David Aikman embraced this 'next Christendom' outlook to claim that China would become a Christian nation!<sup>5</sup>

If such analysis proves to be true it follows then that churches in Latin America, Africa, and Asia have little to offer in terms of sober scholarship. Thus *SPCK Handbook of Anglican Theologians*,<sup>6</sup> published as recent as 1998, gave little attention to theological traditions outside of Britain and North America. East Asia was not even considered. The selection of Anglican theologians, based on their potential to be 'a resource to Anglicans *in the future* [my emphasis]',<sup>7</sup> is overwhelmingly from the West. For instance, T C Chao and K H Ting, two persons who have been influential to the course of Anglicanism and Christianity in China, were left out. So was Lesslie Newbigin. There was little recognition given to mission theologians. It is indeed remarkable because the *Handbook* was meant to be a survey of the 'heritage of Anglican theology' that would help Anglicans to discern their tasks in the midst of the 'important opportunities for consolidation and expansion in the next millennium'.<sup>8</sup> The editor of the *Handbook* did not even think it is important to mention the glaring imbalance in his material. Perhaps he deemed the theological landscape of the non-Western Anglican world as simply the unrolling of Western theologies, and therefore would not deserve scrutiny on its own terms.

This is all the more astonishing because according to Barrett's statistical analysis, by 2025, Anglicans in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America, and Oceania would constitute respectively 67%, 1%, 23%, 1%, 3% and 5% of the projected 113 million worldwide membership.<sup>9</sup> However, notwithstanding that 74% of the Anglicans live outside the West, compilations like McGrath's indicate that the West will continue to provide theological direction for the rest of the Communion, with little expectation that the enthusiastic and conservative members from the rest of the Communion would make any decent contribution, nor that their experience deserves closer theological enquiry.

Will it come down to this: while churches in Latin America, Africa and Asia supply the numbers for the Communion to gain some respectability in the ecumenical scene, they are deemed theologically inarticulate and a cause for embarrassment in civil discourses? Can churches in the 'South' and their future be fully described and dictated by the social-economical dynamics that Jenkins identified? Some may agree and see no occasions for alarm: our religion is conservative, reactionary, and supernatural, so be it. I disagree.

I disagree because this would be a misrepresentation of the Gospel. I disagree also for the sake of my fellows in East Asia and the wider world. Barrett and Jenkins' analyses paint a future of Christianity that does not have a role for historical Christianity and the institutional churches. Christianity is propagated primarily through displays of signs and wonders. Membership becomes fluid. Faith is privatised. All these may not matter if the purpose of the church is reduced to evangelisation—understood to mean that individuals would be given the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel. This new form of Christianity would leave the church incoherent, weak, and ineffective to engage and transform the wider society. Shorn of any intellectual understanding of the faith, the church would be left without any resources for its members to make theologically informed decisions in the public realm. Would not this form of Christianity be most appealing to secular authorities that attempt to deny public expressions of the faith and discriminate Christians from social advancement and from public service?

How can we together move forward to be 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' church, against the odds of the social predictions? Perhaps the challenge before us is no longer the Reunion of Christendom, as the Lambeth Fathers saw it a century ago. If there is 'a special service' Anglicans can render to the whole church,<sup>10</sup> it is that our continuing existence testifies to the world that Christianity will not dissipate into sparks of supernatural manifestations, but remain as an identifiable 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' church of Jesus Christ, to testify for Christ before the nations and peoples of the world.

## 2. Surveying our past together

It is in this connection that we now see the force of the constitutional changes in the Church of Nigeria. Why now? Perhaps it can be best understood not as a snub to Canterbury but a matter of underpinning the church to face the more somber socio-political *kairos* of today.

Radner's comment on the Nigeria revision illustrates a gap of perception within the Communion.<sup>11</sup> Radner argues that Canterbury should be retained in the Nigerian Church Constitution. He asks: 'We might well pose the question in the context of ECUSA's documents of self-ordering: what, if any, constitutional changes would protect or could have protected ECUSA from its current dissolution?' Accountability to Canterbury would somehow ensure 'theological accountability' from ECUSA and help prevent it from 'corporate perversion'. By inference, Canterbury would safeguard Nigeria from apostasy if there were corporate perversion in the future. It is interesting that Radner refers neither to the other Christian communities in the United States, nor to the courageous witness of faithful individuals (like he himself) among the safeguards, as factors that hold ECUSA accountable.

How could a church be preserved from apostasy? This indeed is a matter of faith. This is why the Creed instructs us to declare our *belief* in 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic' church. The question before us is not Canterbury as such and certainly not about the present chair, whom I hold with respect and admiration. Radner seems to suggest that institutional

safeguards are paramount. In this, he stands in line with those who held serious reservations against the constitutions of the Church of South India when it was deliberated in Lambeth 1930 down to Lambeth 1958. Lesslie Newbigin charted this controversy in *The Reunion of the Church*.<sup>12</sup> The Church of South India was clear that Holy Scripture alone, rather than the church's self arrangements, could safeguard the church in the orthodox faith. It stated: 'The Church of South India accepts the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as containing all things necessary to salvation and as the supreme and decisive standard of faith; and acknowledges that the Church must always be ready to correct and reform itself in accordance with the teaching of those Scriptures as the Holy Spirit shall reveal it'.<sup>13</sup> The same reverence for the Holy Scripture can be found in the Communiqué. Newbigin pointed out that despite the endorsement that Lambeth fathers gave to the Union proposals of the Church of South India, it also clearly instructed others not to follow South India's example.<sup>14</sup>

Here we are broaching a history of Anglican mission and the Communion that deserves much closer investigation and needs to be brought to the open. The idea of an Anglican Communion as we understand it today is clearly recent. The insistence on referring to 'Canterbury' in provincial constitutions is new. It is therefore neither extraordinary nor out of order for Nigeria to revise its constitution. Church Missionary Society in the Henry Venn's time was clearly not keen to establish 'Anglican' churches in far-flung places like China.<sup>15</sup> Churches in the west at the turn of the nineteenth century had to deal with rising nationalism and anti-Christian movements, and had to establish national churches at least on expedient grounds.<sup>16</sup> The political situation up to the end of the Second World War was too confusing and unstable for the Church and England and for the missionary societies to decide, for instance, what to do with churches in Asia. The idea of the worldwide Communion and of Canterbury as the (primary) instrument of unity are developments in the past fifty years, as Canterbury's extra-provincial territories had to become autonomous churches in the new political order. Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (Holy Catholic Church in China), founded in 1912, referred only to the Lambeth Quadrilaterals and not to Canterbury. To some extent, the Communion 'lost' India through church union and China through political events. It is perhaps not by coincidence that Anglican churches established in both China and India, two major high cultures outside of western civilisations, do not play an active part in the Communion today. Had Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui be a full member of the Communion today, it would be extraordinary in China's political situation to refer to Canterbury as a primary instrument of unity. What has kept these churches orthodox? I suggest that the churches were safeguarded as *churches* through times of severe testing because of the adherence of the faithful to the sacred texts, rather than by clinging onto any institutional and international scaffolding.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, Owen Chadwick explained the ascendancy of Canterbury in the past few decades this way:

As the Lambeth Conference came to exist and be accepted, it created a consciousness of the Anglican Communion in the general mind. . . . This consciousness of an Anglican Communion produced a desire for instruments to embody it. . . . The bishops had refused the Archbishop of Canterbury the title of Patriarch which some of the early makers of the Conference had wanted him to hold. The Archbishop was much more really a patriarch of the Anglican Communion by 1967 than he had been in 1867. In 1867 he was the senior bishop, and the bishop with the most ancient see. . . . As the Anglican Communion moved across the world his real power grew. A young Church not yet fully constituted needed his authority to choose bishops or to guide the new structure or to settle disputes. A hundred years after 1867 he had lost a lot of this direct power among the Churches as the provinces became independent. Yet the see lost nothing of stature but gained it. For the Archbishop was now the key to the unity of the Anglican Communion, so that one definition of an Anglican diocese was that it was in communion with the See of Canterbury.<sup>18</sup>

Chadwick pointed out that it was as recent as the 1988 joint meeting of the Primates' meeting and ACC that affirmed the Archbishop of Canterbury would serve as the 'primary focus of unity in the Communion'.<sup>19</sup>

The above account only scratches the surface. Unless we are able to come to a truer account of our own history, that we can give a theological account of our ecclesiastical structures, our common life would simply be built upon ideological grounds. If 'loyalty of Anglicans of all traditions must be to a renewed Communion and to Canterbury as the central instrument of unity',<sup>20</sup> as my friend Graham Kings and Francis Bridger plead, then they need to help us to understand how all that arise historically. As historians could well testify such corporate identities can be defended with blind allegiance in the most cynical and vicious ways. Perhaps the Communion so far has never bothered to explain this (hence my proposal to commission a history of the Communion).

### 3. Moving ahead together

The South to South Encounter has made an immense contribution to the Communion by recovering the vision of the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church' before the Communion.<sup>21</sup> For this very reason, it is paramount for church leaders in the "South" to help each other and those in the west to gain a clearer theological understanding of the 'South'.

I hesitate to designate all churches outside of Europe and North America 'global South'. I stated at the beginning of this essay that such terms are recent, used mainly in geopolitical and political activist contexts. Such designations would leave some churches like those in North Asia (Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan [part of ECUSA!]) neither here nor there. I suggest caution in forming a 'global South' bloc in the Communion. The South to South Encounter never intended this. Churches in Asia, Africa, Central America, South America, in for their richness and pluriformity, would make their contributions better through provincial structures and cultivate more particular bilateral ties.

Churches outside of Britain and North America need to learn from each other and help foster a more reflective approach to the faith. The recognition of the central authority of the Holy Scripture to church life commits the church to theological engagement—to borrow Augustine's phrase, to the tasks of 'teaching Christianity (*de doctrina Christiana*)' to the Christian community and to the nations. Theological engagement is by nature catholic. This would only strengthen the Communion bonds.

Teaching Christianity to our own churches is also a matter of our own survival as a community committed to the historical faith and order. Barrett's projections show that by 2025, the number of Anglicans compared with the independents (with no commitment to historical Christianity) in each continent is as follows: Africa (76m/140m), Asia (.9m/247m), Europe (26m/29m), Latin America (1.4m/60m), North America (3m/103m), Oceania (6m/2.5m). Thus, in North America, Asia and Latin America, the Anglican communities would be overwhelmed by Independents. The number of Anglicans compared with the Independents would be negligible; in North and Latin America less than 3%. Who would be able to understand and interpret 'historical theology' and 'liturgy' in the next generation? Would there be 'Anglican' theologians around twenty years from now? What is the 'Anglican ecclesiology' over against the 'Presbyterian one'—suggested by Graham Kings—that we are defending?<sup>22</sup> Are churches outside of Europe and North America, who generally do not have good theological libraries at their disposal, able to understand '*doctrina Christiana*' those days? The situation is acute.

Elsewhere I have suggested some practical theological tasks that we can undertake. I would welcome a more systematic gathering and reflection of our common history. A catechism for today, inspired by the noblest scholarship and commitment to the Scripture, would provide the needed guidance to our faithful and underpin the substance of our Covenant. I take Canterbury's words at face value, to see the 'instruments of unity' less institutionally, and interpret them as servants of unity. Hence, churches outside of the west

should welcome Canterbury to exercise his teaching and prophetic ministry among them. The establishing of new Anglican study centres—in communion with St Augustine, Canterbury—in the 'flash-points' in Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be a positive step in pulling the Communion together to guard the gospel by theological elucidation and learning. This will be a concrete way to acknowledge that we need to embrace, other than Rome, the emerging theological traditions in the wider Communion. This is the church that we love and seek to defend. There is no other. After all, it is only through the renewing of the mind that we can overcome the social forces that are tearing us apart, defy the predictions of trend watchers that speak of our demise and witness in our very Communion the indefectibility of a Christian community that is attentive to the Word of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Lambeth 1867, Resolution 8.

<sup>2</sup> David Barrett, George Kurian, and Todd Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: a Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, two volumes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); David Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 78.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 163-190.

<sup>5</sup> David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing. How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington: Regnery, 2003), 285-292.

<sup>6</sup> Alister E McGrath, ed. *The SPCK Handbook of Anglican Theologians* (London: SPCK, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> *Handbook*, xii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, xi.

<sup>9</sup> See Table 1-3 in *World Christian Encyclopedia*, volume I, 12.

<sup>10</sup> See 'The Encyclical Letter' in *Lambeth Conference 1948* (London: Hazell, Watson & Viney, 1948), 22.

<sup>11</sup> See his *Two Notes on the Church of Nigeria's Constitutional Revisions*, [http://www.anglicancommunioninstitute.org/articles/Nigeria Notes.htm](http://www.anglicancommunioninstitute.org/articles/Nigeria%20Notes.htm).

<sup>12</sup> See especially Chapter Eight 'The Standard of Faith', in *The Reunion of the Church*, second revised edition (London; SCM, 1960), 124-147.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, xviii.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, xvii.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Peter Williams, *The ideal of the self-governing church: a study in Victorian Missionary strategy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. the discussions in the 1928 Jerusalem meeting of the International Missionary Council. See also the 'Appeal to all Christian people' on Reunion of Christendom, Lambeth 1920, Resolution 9.

<sup>17</sup> Hence in the revised Nigerian Constitution, Section 3: '... as the Lord has commanded in His holy word and as the same are received as taught in the Book of Common Prayer and the ordinal of 1662 and in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion'. A most moving Preface to a Book of Common Prayer is that issued by the Diocese of Fujian (by Bishop Michael Chang [Zhang Guangxu]), China, composed shortly before the political changes in October 1949. It reads (in translation): 'The Bishop together with all in the Diocese of Fujian are exceedingly grateful to the Almighty Heavenly Lord, that we are able to finish this task [in producing this BCP] in these tumultuous and difficult times. . . . Perhaps the day will come when we have to give up many activities we have done before. May our focus be on worship, and to recognise that worship is the one and only crucial thing, the beginning and end of our endeavours. Whenever we have in our hands the Book of Common Prayer, then we are able, under the protection of the Heavenly Lord, to worship in spirit and in truth, that our lives would be a sign of our worship, that the entire Diocese of Fujian will move ahead in the power of the Spirit' (Preface, Section 10, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1949).

<sup>18</sup> Owen Chadwick 'Introduction' in *Resolutions of the Twelve Lambeth Conferences 1867-1988*, edited by Roger Coleman (Toronto; Anglican Book Centre, 1992), xiii-xiv.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, xiv. The *new* role of Canterbury is underlined in a subtle way in the Lambeth Conferences. In the Lambeth Report 1988, the Table of Contents refer to Canterbury's address as 'The Archbishop of Canterbury's Opening Address'. In 1998, Carey's address in the Contents page is designated as 'The Presidential Address', a subtle but important change in Communion perception!

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<sup>20</sup> See 'Why Archbishop Akinola is wrong', Fulcrum, <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=19>.

<sup>21</sup> I had the opportunity in recent years to dialogue with several colleagues in the west on Communion identity. It is interesting that whenever I suggest that 'Holy Catholic Church' would provide a better alternative to 'Anglican' in describing our Communion, the lively conversations would almost immediately end! I had become a plague to the *Anglo-cans*!

<sup>22</sup> Here may I share my profound sadness when I revisited with my children an old church in a university town in the heart of England a few years ago, to show them where their parents worshipped and give thanks to God before an old 'altar'. I was horrified when I saw that the church setting and style of worship have radically changed. The Holy Table is gone, the sanctuary is used for seating; worship is non liturgical, conducted from the South end and led by leaders in jeans with guitar. It all happened at a Sunday main worship. There and then, it dawned upon me that ancient landmarks are removed in a town where Cranmer and Ridley died to defend the 'Anglican' way.